

Translated excerpt

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Brummps.
Sie nannten ihn Ameise

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Brummps.
They Said He Was an Ant

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Chapter 1.

Now, this here is Johnny. Johnny Ant. And Johnny is up to his neck in it. Well, more than half of his body and four of his six legs are in it – ‘it’ being sticky, grey, quite firm fox poop.

There’s no trace of the fox, of course – he squatted down under this fir tree only for a few relaxing moments and is now long gone, over the hills and far away. But the fox isn’t the issue here. The issue is this:

Hummmmppphh

Johnny can’t get out by himself. To be honest, his wriggling is only burying him deeper and deeper into the smelly heap. Fortunately, Johnny has a friend. What more do you need in life? I’m sure if we all just waited around long enough, she’d come along and free Johnny from his, well, fairly stinky situation. That’s the way it’s always gone before now.

And how did Johnny land himself in this predicament? Why did he decide to bury his head in this rather large mound? Well, Johnny has many strengths, but his sense of smell is not one of them. At least not if you ask the ants. And if Big Chiefy and the Bossys (who are all called Sisters, really – but we’ll get to that later) needed his help, because they’d found “super cool construction material” and “really legit” needed Johnny to transport it, they might consider helping him out. Because Big Chiefy and the Bossys are mean, but for Johnny, family is family. And he wouldn’t need to think twice, wouldn’t need an incentive – if someone from his family needed his help, he’d be there in a heartbeat.

Ahhh, that guy! How thick can you get?

Guys, and I was like: wow, so dumb.

Hey, look – construction materials!

Uhh that was my –

Shut it! That was Chief’s idea!

Er... but no, I –

Oh the smell, if he ever gets out!

IF he gets out, Chief, IF

Like I said: mean.

Chapter 2.

Where's your helmet, Johnny?

"Rule number one: never go out without a helmet on!"

"But what if my helmet is bro –"

"Also: never, ever-ever-ever in your life believe what Big Chiefy and the Bossys tell you. Which rule is that?"

"Number 17. I know. But –"

"You just can't trust them. Or have you forgotten when they gave you that disgusting lice juice to drink? And all night long you sang so loud that the yellow butterflies wanted to wallop you and, well, butterflies don't usually wallop things."

"I know, but –"

"Or that other time, when they sent you so deep into the forest to find special glue for Queen Mumma that you couldn't find your way back?"

"No –"

"There wasn't even any special glue, and Queen Mumma hadn't said a word to them."

"I know –"

"Or or or that one time, when they tied your antennae together while you slept and you couldn't walk straight?"

"Yes, I know, but –"

"To be honest that was really funny, Johnny."

"Hmph."

"It was all oopsie-daisie, flapping round in circles, then BAM, stick to the face, CLUNK, and you almost fell down a hole."

"Every time, I realise it's a prank too late."

It's a problem, Johnny Ant.

Huh, yeah. You're not wrong. The goody in this story is called Ant. Johnny Ant. And, as you can see for yourself, he's not like the rest. At least, not like the other ants. And if you're thinking, "Well, yes, how nice, the diversity of nature, blah blah blah, then yes, you're right. But also kinda wrong. Or at least you don't have the foggiest how it works with ants. They are all the same. Take a seat next to an ant line and show me diversity. Watch them scuttle up the anthill – pick one and just watch it for a while. Watch closely. Get right up close and notice every little detail. That's your ant. Give them a name, for all I care. And then close your eyes for a second. Just a second. Open your eyes again and show me which ant is yours. Your Eliza-Sophia. Your Angelica. Your Veronica-Stephania. Right? Mmm-hmm, right. Diversity among ants."

And if you're now thinking, okay fine, whatever, no diversity among ants, got it, but Johnny isn't an ant – then you'd be right again. Johnny isn't an ant. You know that. I know that. But Johnny, his friend Plum, the Bossys and all other ants from Anthill Number Three – they don't know that. And here's how it happened...

Chapter 3.

It was springtime, as it is now, still cold in the mornings, but not quite as dark as it had been a few weeks ago. The trees were slowly waking again after their long hibernation, thrusting buds, baby pine needles and fresh leaves out from their branches; everything was growing, getting louder by the day, the beginning of an annual concert in which absolutely everyone got involved. The foxes and the chickadees, the beetles and bees and blossoms. The worms and the woodpeckers, the mice and the hedgehogs. The ants, of course, and deer, and so many plants. The first tentative sounds cautiously call out in March, grow steadily louder in April, by May and June the whole ensemble is bursting with song, before reaching the crescendo in July, when it starts to fade out, falling to silence in November; some rest, some fall into a deep slumber not to emerge again until the next year. And this day – as in, the one where Johnny begins his story – was something of a bombshell exploding out of nowhere.

Me, though, I don't sleep. At all. Ever. So I wasn't awoken by this BANG, but the ants were. It was astonishing. That moment, just before the sun slips her first rays into the forest – it was only for a moment, but in that dark moment we heard the BANG. Ants are creatures of habit, and wake up with the sun, not a moment earlier or later. And even though it was just a moment too early, it *was* too early, and oh my – the commotion in Anthill Number Three. So much that even the Queen Mumma didn't know what was happening. And that's not on, because the Queen Mumma must know what's going on at all times, so she had to go check. To leave her parlour, put her very life in danger, there and then.

I had known it was coming for a long time. But that's my problem: I can only ever observe. I see everything – I'm not even exaggerating – truly, everything, but I couldn't say:

“Hey guys, B.B. the blackbird, up at the crack of dawn – she's just dropped her breakfast! A baby dung beetle has just fallen from her beak and landed in front of your anthill! It's glistening black and gold in the morning sunlight and needs your help!”

The thing with ants is this: although they can do a lot of things, although they're super strong and although there are so many of them, although they could one day achieve world domination because they're tougher than tough and because they rescue each other from the gravest dangers – sometimes they can also be totally and utterly clueless. And even when Johnny was really, really tiny, you could still tell he was definitely not an ant. They could still have taken him in, helped him, sure, but maybe it would have turned out better for everyone had Queen Mumma not cried out, upon seeing the injured baby beetle, “He's one of us! He needs help!”

Waaaahhhh

And, to be honest, Queen Mumma must have had her doubts, for sure. How different it could have been, had she not named him... she could have called him Sister Poo-Poo for all I care, anything but Johnny A. A for Ant.

But that's the problem with queens: they're always right. They never make mistakes. Never. And if they do, as in this case, they cannot under any circumstances admit it, because they're queens, right, and queens don't make mistakes. That's just how it is. Picture this: Queen Mumma had listened to her gut instinct and had maybe just announced the next morning, "Sorry, guys, I messed up, he's not an ant at all, he's a beetle. Let's help him – but *really* help him. Find out what he needs. Find his family, do something."

Then maybe everything would have turned out differently. Then we wouldn't be here now. I might be telling you about the broken-hearted woodpecker, or the daffodil with bad breath, and not about Johnny, the largest ant in the world.

But no: Queen Mumma said what she said. And so Sister Professor Doctor Doctor Ant comes along, paramedics in tow, and Johnny is transported away deep into the perfectly-organised heart of the anthill, and nursed back to health on so much lice juice that he could hardly fit through the tunnels after a week. On day eight Baby Johnny had to leave the heart of the anthill for good, with the help of an entire troop of ants shoving as hard as they could. Since then, Johnny has lived outside. Night and day, in rain and snow. And more than anything, he wants to belong.

And that's that. So the entire colony, including Johnny himself, think Johnny is just an ant – an ant that is simply too weak and too big.

Chapter 4.

"It's kinda practical, really – bigger ants are harder to kidnap," says Plum. She always says that when she's trying to cheer Johnny up. Like just now, as the two of them snuggle up in their cosy trough in front of Anthill Number Three.

"Mm," murmurs Johnny.

"Do you know what I really love about problems?"

"Yep. If –"

"If life's going well, they make you famous. Like back when I was still living in Anthill Number Twelve. When the Great Rain came. Everyone despaired, but not me! I thought, 'Wait a second, we can do something about this!' And everyone was like..."

Johnny knows the story well. At least, I do. Let's briefly skip over that one.

The lady in Johnny's life is, well, Sister, originally.

That's how it is with ants – they're called what they are. They're all sisters. Sisters who hatched out of their eggs, right here, who stay right here forever, sisters, who love their repetitive daily routines and who all have the same one goal. If you asked them what that was, they'd say:

Ex-pan-sion!

World dom-in-a-tion!

Hey! Step aside – coming through!

But – oh yeah: Plum, who really should also be called Sister. Now that I can explain.

One evening, Johnny and his friends were sunbathing in the last of the day's rays ("Evening sun is the best sun!" Another gem of wisdom Plum loves to parrot), lying on the trunk of a beech tree, under which a small group of humans were also resting. What Johnny loves most about the edge of the woods (and what makes his friend's eyes glaze over with boredom) is that in such a short space of time, this family had managed to tame this little patch of wild woodland under their feet and bring it under control. They heaved their huge rucksacks off their backs, and at the click of their fingers turned that which just moments before had looked like a wild mess of sticks and leaves into a cosy spot with all that they needed. Where there once was the forest floor, now lay bright picnic blankets; the patch once illuminated by the sun through the canopy of leaves was now shielded by umbrellas.

A cube the size of a human hand unfolded into a dining table and out of magical shiny silver paper emerged folding chairs the size of young rabbits. Dripping bathing suits and shoes hung in pairs on the low-hanging branches of the beech tree; slightly higher up little balls of light glowed like miniature full moons. While the little humans did gymnastics on their chairs, one of the bigger humans poked around in his bag and said things like,

"Sugar plum, could you just –"

"I can't find that, sugar –"

"Sugar-plum-cutie-patootie, did you pack soandso?"

And Sugar Plum had. Sugar Plum found it, knew where everything was, hadn't forgotten a thing. Sugar Plum pulled out knives, ropes, straps and hooks. Hoicked the branch up, brushed the beechnuts away, stuck the chair legs in. In each of her hundred trouser pockets lay the solution to any potential problem. Johnny's friend marvelled, breathless. Such silent wisdom, such elegance, such thinking-of-everything-ness! She had never seen anything like it before.

And that's when it happened. Just before Johnny and his friend had to head back to Anthill Number Three. The sorceress revealed her final trick. From a seemingly unremarkable grey-brown bag, fastened to the largest of the four rucksacks, Sugar Plum pulled out a monster made of cloth, which, thanks only to her superhuman strength, she was able to control for a moment. Her soft pink arms wrapped tight around the beast and she pressed it against her strong body. She gasped and struggled, but the trapped animal fought back! Then Sugar Plum swung out, lunged right, flinging the animal left and away from her. Johnny watched, amazed, as the animal – I know, I know, it wasn't really an animal – unfolded itself like a butterfly exploding out of its cocoon. There was a small bang, and there, where seconds before there was nothing, suddenly stood a house. A full human house. With a door and a roof and everything. A little home, made of fabric, in which Sugar Plum and her family would spend a warm, sheltered night.

As Johnny and his friend were making their way back, Plum stopped abruptly. “Johnny?”

Johnny knew right away it must be important. Truly important matters can’t be discussed while scuttling.

“Yeah?”

“How long have we been building Anthill Number Three?”

“Well, I mean, we, you and me now, maybe –”

“At least a hundred summers, right?”

“Oh, at LEAST.”

“If we had something like that...”

“Then what?”

“Plum,” breathed Plum. “What does that sound like to you?”

“Hmm,” went Johnny. “It sounds like –”

“Plum! It sounds like Sugar Pl...”

Once, an acorn had hit Johnny’s back as he was trying to stay out of the way of the construction ants. His hind legs had snapped away, which hurt a lot, but even worse was the feeling that he hadn’t made it in life. He was always in the way, even if only in the flight path of an acorn.

Plum. Sounds like an acorn PLUMmeting onto his back.

“Plummmmmm. Sounds like the murmur of the grass as you roam through it, right? No, like a hummingbird. Endlessly smooth, but still alert. It sounds like always knowing what to do. Fearless in the face of danger. Don’t you think, Johnny?”

“Huh. Yeah. I guess.”

“Because you always have everything you need on you. Because you’ve thought of everything – Plum! She won’t mess up – Plum! If you’re stuck, ask – Plum!”

“Mm-hmm.”

Johnny’s friend who, up until this point, had just been called Sister, like all other ants, took a deep breath in. “Johnny, that’s me! That’s my name. From this moment on, I shall be known as Plum.”

And Plum was right again: Anthill Number Three had indeed been around forever and ever. And except perhaps for the oldest fir trees, no-one knows what life was like before then. Personally, I’m not super into conifers – bit too arrogant for my taste – but their memory? Extraordinary!

Anthill Number Three is the largest one in the wood and the ants are all mighty proud of it. The outer layer of the anthill is made of pine needles, but not just randomly chucked on top of each other, no. The sisters from Anthill Number Three developed such

a cunning technique for positioning these needles that the temperature inside the anthill remains at a constant snuggly buggly 25°C. Thanks to a special gas exchange pumping mechanism. Rain water rolls off, obviously, and the wind blows around it.

There are several areas in the anthill. The largest is where the bunks are. Each ant has its own round bunk – so roughly a billion trillion gazillion bunks. Last time I checked. And there are more every time I check. Then, a little further inside, there's the children's area. They are hatched, brought up, fed and nurtured. Little mini sisters – quite sweet, if you ask me. They look like the adults but somehow fresher, shinier and teeny tinier.

Speaking of appearances: the fact that Johnny can't tell Big Chiefy and the Bossys apart from the other, nicer ants is no coincidence. He has tried often enough, as is custom here. But he just can't manage.

Where you see: [\(Illustration\)](#)

Johnny sees: [\(Illustration\)](#)

Because, well, as well as a very particular sense of smell (how else could he have ended up with his head in a pile of fox poo?), Johnny also has very bad vision. Like, really, really bad.